

Characterization through Relationships in Flannery O' Conner's Short Story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

Fuhua Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning 116028, China

Abstract

The paper focuses on the detailed characterization of the main characters in Flannery O' Conner's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" through the relationships between one another, especially their conversations and responses. Through the analysis from the perspective of relationships, the character of the grandmother, The Misfit and the two kids is revealed to the readers.

Keywords

character, relationships, Flannery O' Conner, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find".

1. Introduction

Flannery O' Conner's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is a violent, shocking and tragic story written in a Gothic style. Liu Min claims that not a single "good man" can be found in the story. [1] The title of the story suggests that in the writer's era there are virtually no sages that are purely kind and selfless. Actually, the "evil" aspects of the main characters in the story can be shown in the relationships between one another, especially in their conversations and responses. The present paper tries to analyze in detail the character of the main characters through their relationships in Flannery O' Conner's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" in a bid to better understand the main characters and the corrupted society in the writer's era as a whole.

2. Body

2.1. Characterization of the Grandmother

The grandmother is concerned about her own looks. She always wants to appear graceful, civilized and noble. She dresses delicately before she goes on a tour with her family. She cares so much about her looks that she would even consider keeping her delicate and noble image in case she dies on the highway. Also, the grandmother cannot bear loneliness, and she wants to live her life to the fullest by having fun. That is why she would rather travel with her family than stay at home alone.

At the beginning of the story, the grandmother insists on going to east Tennessee in order to visit her old acquaintances. When she tries to change her son's mind, her son responds with silence, ignoring his mother's proposal and proceeding with the sports section of the journal. But the grandmother does not easily give up. After the failure, she tries to persuade her daughter-in-law to take her advice. Here we can see the grandmother's selfishness in that she only takes her own interests into consideration.

The grandmother indulges herself in the good old days by talking about them often and takes pride in her past glories. To calm her grandchildren down, the grandmother tells them a story about her in which she is pursued by a very good-looking man who has later become a very wealthy man. The grandmother is obviously showing off, recollecting the sweet memories of the past when she is young. When she recalls an old plantation that she visits when she is a young lady, she is tempted to visit the old house once again, which shows her stubbornness and

yearning to repeat the past. She tries to achieve her purpose by making good use of her grandchildren's curiosity about and interest in the secret panel she has mentioned. The grandmother is likely to eulogize the past and show her contempt about the present. She and Red Sammy talk about the better times of the past in which they can go off and leave their screen door unlatched, and they both believe that people are certainly not nice like they used to be.

The grandmother also tends to distinguish herself from black people, considering them as inferior or tending to materialize them. The grandmother claims that if she could paint, she could paint that picture of the little Negro who doesn't have any britches on. She also mentions the story of a little Negro who eats the watermelon with initials "E. A. T." on it. The grandmother appears to be showing sympathy, but she is actually exploiting the two black boys' identity for release of her feelings or just for fun.

The grandmother seems to be over-confident about her abilities to persuade The Misfit into giving up the murder and she shows her nearsightedness by being clever rather than wise. She thinks that she is clever in that she recognizes The Misfit at once and tells him about her immediate recognition. But it is just this recognition that leads to the tragedy of the whole family. The grandmother also shows her strong yearning to survive in the face of death. While his son and daughter-in-law keep silent most of the time, she is the most talkative relatively speaking. She tries every means such as constantly mentioning Jesus Christ, emphasizing her female identity, offering to give all her money away, praising The Misfit as a good man and comforting The Misfit to get a chance to survive the murder. Ironically, when the grandmother reaches out and touches The Misfit, he springs back as if a snake has bitten him and shoots the grandmother three times through the chest. Here we can see there is total lack of trust between the grandmother and The Misfit. A snake himself, The Misfit considers the grandmother a snake who can bite him anytime. The Misfit's response is almost mechanical, which shows his tendency to trust nobody. To summarize, by depicting the interactions between the grandmother and the other main characters in the short story, O' Conner manages to highlight the grandmother's vain, selfish and self-conceited character.

2.2. Characterization of the Misfit

The Misfit appears at the latter part of the story. He is the leader out of the three murderers, and has absolute say and complete control over the other two. He appears to be a gentleman, speaking gently to his prey. The Misfit originally may be a well-educated man, which can be guessed out by the writer's repeated mention of the pair of glasses he wears. Having experienced a lot of ups and downs and having seen life through, The Misfit finds no pleasure in life by saying that "It's no real pleasure in life" [2] at the end of the story.

The Misfit does not consider himself a good man, nor does he consider himself the worst. Actually, The Misfit is originally in nature not a bad man.[3] Unfortunately, he chooses to be a cruel and merciless murderer. He is definitely an evil figure, killing the whole family without any regret or hesitation, but his killing of the innocent has his own justifications. He now becomes a cold-blooded murderer due to the unfair treatment that has been imposed upon him. He has been falsely accused of killing his biological father and put into prison. For him, the strange thing is that "He hadn't committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me." [2] Therefore, The Misfit loses hope and confidence in human nature and a corrupted society he lives in. And he loses hope and confidence in God too, for Jesus fails to give him a hand when he is in trouble. He begins to depend on himself for survival and prosperity, discarding all the social rules and Christianity once and for all.

The Misfit admits that children make him nervous, and asks Bailey's wife to let her kids sit down by her, which indicates that children's naivety is what he is most afraid of. He is not afraid of dealing with adults, but he has trouble handling the innocent children, which suggests that there is still some humanity left in him. After hearing the grandmother's persuading him to be

a good man again, he may, for a very short period of time, takes that option into consideration. But on second thoughts, he gives up the unrealistic idea and determines to remain as a Satan. To summarize, by interacting with the family, especially the grandmother, The Misfit shows his cold, merciless and suspicious character.

2.3. Characterization of John Wesley and June Star

John Wesley and June Star who are very rebellious, selfish and self-conceited can be categorized as the lost generation. They tend to be direct and down-to-earth when speaking out, never taking into consideration other people's feelings. They mercilessly reveal their grandmother's reluctance to stay home alone. And they are quite precise in their evaluation of their grandmother's character: always willing to go out to explore the world. When the grandmother frightens them by saying that "What would you do if this fellow, The Misfit, caught you?" [2], Wesley responds that he would smack his face. But when he is really facing The Misfit, he becomes a motionless coward. The boy's extreme arrogance in everyday life and his timidity in danger form a vivid contrast. John Wesley and June Star are very ignorant when encountering the three murderers within the first several minutes, as they tend to speak and act boldly without getting aware of the threatening situation.

The children are reading comic magazines along the way, but they seem to show no interest in the beautiful landscape. John Wesley says that he would like to go through Georgia fast so they do not have to look at it much. In his eyes, "Tennessee is a hillbilly dumping ground, and Georgia is a lousy state too." [2] Obviously, the kids have not built and developed love for their native state and their country as a whole. Instead, the kids entertain themselves with modern media rather than nature that can cultivate their minds. In a word, through the conversations with their grandmother and The Misfit, the two kids show their rebellious and ignorant character typical of a lost generation.

3. Conclusion

In O' Conner's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find", the main characters' character is vividly shown to her readers through their own words and actions by interacting with one another. The grandmother's vain, selfish and self-conceited character is revealed through her interaction with his son and daughter-in-law, her grandchildren and The Misfit. The Misfit's cold, merciless and suspicious character is revealed mostly through her interaction with the grandmother. John Wesley and June Star's rebellious and ignorant character is revealed mostly through their interaction with the grandmother and The Misfit. Through the analysis, readers can better understand the main characters in the short story and a corrupted society of the writer's era as a whole.

References

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- [2] Flannery O' Conner. A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories[M] New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1983.
- [3] Wang Yong. Brief Analysis about the Theme of Violence and Salvation in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"[J]. The Guide of Science and Education, 2019(30).